Washington Merry-Go-Round

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By JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — President Nixon maintains a mysterious "private, personal file" of intimate conversations on dictabelts which he has cached in a top security filing cabinet in the White House basement.

This is the secret testimony of the President's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, given during a two-hour session on February 20 to Senate Watergate lawyers.

The President, she swore, "from time to time, for his own private, personal files does do some tapes. I have been in the Lincoln Sitting Room at times when he will remember something from a conversation and put on a dictabelt...."

At that point, apparently realizing she had let a White House cat out of the bag, Miss Woods paused and hastily added, "such as 'Julie said this or that to me.'"

She said "those personal, private dictabelts...are put in an envelope — maybe we get two or three at a time — they may be three weeks apart.

"We have no idea of what is on them — they are his own personal, private things which are not transcribed. They are put in an envelope, sealed up and the date we received them is put on the envelope."

As far as we can determine, this is the first mention of this hidden stash of tapes. None, according to Watergate investigators, have ever been turned over to the Special Prosecutor, the Senate Watergate Committee or the House impeachment panel.

Pressed during her secret testimony by assistant Watergate counsel Terry Lenzner, Miss Woods said the tapes are "kept in his filing cabinets" in a secure area "on the basement floor in the West Wing" of the White House.

Although not under oath for her testimony, Miss Woods after reading an 80-page transcript of it, swore to it on Thursday. She made these other points:

— She has made a detailed statement to the Internal Revenue Service on the $100,000 donation given by Howard Hughes to Bebe Rebozo for President Nixon. The statement, prepared by White House lawyer Fred Buzhardt, was requested in connection with an IRS investigation of Rebozo. Assisting Rebozo with his IRS problems, she said, is the crack Philadelphia lawyer now also helping President Nixon on his tax problems, Kenneth Gemmill.

— Miss Woods' brother, Joe Woods, an ex-FBI agent and now a sheriff in Illinois, was considered for a security job by White House Watergate gumshoe Jack Caulfield. Miss Woods told her brother "not to join with them unless he was in charge because I think my brother is a lot brighter than any group Jack Caulfield would have gotten together." Miss Woods was right: Caulfield got caught in a pailful of unsavory Watergate activities.

— Unlike President Nixon who always seemed to make a profit in his dealings with Rebozo, Miss Woods said she "took a capital gains loss" when she sold her shares in Rebozo's Fishers Island real estate project. She disposed of them, she thought, through former White House lawyer Edward Morgan.

While often biting and even sarcastic, Miss Woods' testimony is full of insights into the White House and the President. At one point, she illustrated poignantly his mania for saving every scrap of Nixoniana — a squirreling away that finally created a tape-and-paper rope which is now hanging him.

"He saves everything," she said, her tone softening. "He saves place cards, menus even. One Halloween, we were at Camp David and he and Mrs. Nixon invited me to dinner....The steward put a colored mask on each of the three plates — I know Mrs. Nixon put hers in the wastebasket and I did mine," she said.

But Nixon sent his mask to her to be "sealed in an envelope and put away." He also saved "little notes from Julie — from Tricia," all with the same pack rat diligence that preserved the Watergate tapes currently being used to indict his closest associates.

During the testimony, committee counsel Sam Dash promised Miss Woods' lawyer, Charles Rhyne, "I can assure you as much as humanly possible, not a word of this interview will be out....We will have just one copy and I will put it in my safe and seal it."

Actually, it was Rhyne who duplicated the transcript and sent it to the committee staff and members, thus leading indirectly to our obtaining it.

In a moment of rare levity, Miss Woods said she herself had come to call the list of contributors she kept "Rose Mary's baby." But she said she had never heard of the "Alpha 4" list we described in a recent column because "I never read Jack Anderson." The list, actually, was not made up at the White House, but, as we reported, at the Nixon campaign committee.

At another point, she was asked about a Howard Hughes contribution for the 1972 campaign of $16,000, but she said "I could not tell you" if it were on her own list which, she added, is often used for deciding on who gets invited to "White House entertaining."

As to other files, she said she was "sure there must be a file on F. Donald Nixon," the President's brother, at the White House. "I have never seen it because I have never gone through the file room," she went on. Despite her earlier disclaimer about reading our column, she said she thought she had first learned that the White House was bugging Don Nixon "in Mr. Anderson's column."

The committee lawyers pushed the peppery Miss Woods hardest on how Rebozo came to tell her of the $100,000 Hughes contribution.

"Why was he telling you?" asked counsel Lenzner.

"I would not know," she replied. "I gather in case anything happened to him, he would want someone to be aware of it — that is my guess." She said Rebozo also told his lawyer the $100,000 was being kept in a safe deposit box.

"He told his lawyer, why would he have to tell you?" inquired Dash.

"I think he trusted his lawyer but I don't know how much you trust anyone with that much cash — I would certainly tell two people," she replied. She said she assumed Rebozo held on to the money, given as early as 1969, because the Hughes business

deals "were in such turmoil."

She said Rebozo eventually returned exactly the same bills he had gotten from Hughes.

Her sympathies were all with her "good friend" Rebozo on the IRS investigation, she indicated in describing how she learned of the probe.

"It is a big problem for a man trying to run a bank to have an investigation," she explained. "He called and we were talking and he said, 'Well, the IRS has even moved in here'...I am sure he was upset as you would be."